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# Desert harmony: Stories of collaboration between Indigenous musicians and university students

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*This article will discuss the ways in which community service learning programs in music can foster meaningful collaborations between universities and Indigenous communities. Drawing on recent pedagogical literature on service learning and insights from a four-year partnership between Australian Indigenous musicians at the Winanjjikari Music Centre in Tennant Creek and music students from Queensland Conservatorium Griffith University, it will describe how such programs can facilitate significant cross-cultural exchanges between students and Indigenous communities. By drawing on observations and interview data from those involved in the project, this paper argues that these partnerships can both assist communities with activities such as cultural maintenance, and provide students with intercultural experiences that have the potential to transform their understandings of Indigenous culture.*

*Keywords: service learning, cross-cultural collaboration, Australian Indigenous studies, music.*

As the afternoon sun disappears behind the row of trees lining the sports field the audience begins to gather. Slowly they migrate towards the edge of the circle of red dirt demarking the performance space. Children run after each other ducking and weaving between picnic rugs and plastic chairs, while the adults casually chat to one another. The night is hot and muggy from the desert rains that fell earlier in the day. As darkness begins to descend over the field, a large rig of theatre lights is switched on. The red dirt radiates from the sudden surge of light. Our students, Cody, Mitch, Rachael and Michael, are busying themselves setting up microphones and checking sound levels for the important cultural event known as DanceSite. As we kneel side-by-side on the moist grass behind our tripod, we try to disguise our wonder and blend

in with the crowd, but it is impossible. Our white skin glows like a beacon next to the sea of Indigenous faces surrounding us.<sup>1</sup>

Warumungu Elder Mrs Judy Nakkamarra Nixon announces that the performance is about to commence. A respectful hush descends upon the crowd of thousands. She welcomes everyone to Central Australia and acknowledges the custodians of this sacred land, both past and present. When she finishes speaking all eyes turn towards the large canvas rigged up to the change rooms. A handful of men appear through the opening and silently walk to the centre of the circle. They wait for a group of Elders to take their place on a small stage facing them. Cody and Mitch silently adjust the microphones to reach the Elders' lips. Clapping sticks begin and the Elders start singing in descending melodic lines. The dancers stamp their feet, travelling forward and backward through clouds of red dirt. The white ochre paint on their bodies makes them look like moving canvasses against the night sky. We soon notice the sweet smell of eucalyptus wafting through the air from the gum leaves tied to the men's ankles. As the dancing finishes the Elders banter and tell the dancers what they did wrong. During this brief reprieve, we both adjust our camera lens angle and scan the audience for anyone we might know. We notice J. D.<sup>2</sup>, a local musician we have been working with, looking at us. We smile. He nods his head and points to the dancers mouthing, "not bad, huh?"

We quickly realize that what we are witnessing is a privilege few get to experience in a lifetime. Our senses are awash with each sight, sound, smell and texture. Every art form is evoked in a way we could only dream about before tonight. As our students work on the sound and lighting and carefully adjust the equipment to meet the needs of each group of Elders on stage, we see them drinking in everything this performance has to teach them. As we watch these interactions unfold, it occurs to us how unusual this situation is. University courses rarely venture beyond the walls of their institutions like this, and consequently students and Indigenous musicians are seldom given the opportunity to build meaningful relationships with one another.

This performance was the culmination of a two-week community service learning project with students from Griffith University and Indigenous artists in Tennant Creek in 2010. The service learning project was timed to coincide with the Desert Harmony Festival and involved the students collaborating with Indigenous artists on a diverse range of projects, including the major traditional dance event that featured dancers and singers from around the Northern Territory that we have just described, along with the Mandinka Sound performance and workshop, the Birds of Tennant Creek drama production, and a festival showcase of local bands from the Barkly Region. The 2010 service learning project built on a similar project that we ran in

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1 In this paper we tend to use the term 'Indigenous' to refer to the members of many cultural groups who have been involved with this project (including both Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples), although the term 'Aboriginal' refers more specifically to our collaborators from the Barkly Tablelands region in Central Australia, who use this term themselves along with everyday terms such as 'Blackfella' and 'Whitefella', to describe broad aspects of Indigenous and non-Indigenous life and culture.

2 This Elder has recently passed away, so his initials have been used throughout the paper as a sign of respect.

2009, where the students collaborated on a range of recording projects with local Indigenous musicians at the Winanjjikari Music Centre, and assisted in the setup of a new recording and rehearsal space at Drover's Hall. The students were also involved in songwriting sessions with a local Indigenous woman Lynette Lewis, who worked for the Melbourne-based organisation The Song Room. In 2011, we returned with a new group of students who participated in cross-cultural training classes at the Papulu Apparr-Kari Language Centre and worked alongside the Winanjjikari musicians in performance, songwriting and recording projects. The 2012 student participants assisted extensively with the Desert Harmony Festival, and participated in music recording projects and performances with Warren H. Williams, Frank Yamma and members of the Music Centre.

A certain kind of perspective comes from running this program across four years, as described above. No two years are exactly the same due to the fact that the community is situated within dynamic and changing contexts, and the students bring with them a diverse range of skills, personalities and prior experiences. As facilitators, we have been able to observe a number of factors that define each trip as unique and sometimes unpredictable. Perhaps the most pertinent of these has been timing: specifically, whether the service learning project is timed to coincide with the Desert Harmony Festival or not. During 'Festival time,' students have often engaged in complex negotiations with non-Indigenous community members, as they go about their work assisting with Festival events. At times this has resulted in students being confronted by existing tensions between the non-Indigenous community of professional arts workers and volunteers. This initial feeling has usually been countered by an eventual sense of elation and intense enjoyment as they are presented with increasing opportunities for musical collaboration with local Indigenous musicians towards the end of the Festival. In contrast, 'non-Festival time' has been defined more by the day-by-day intercultural negotiations between students and the members of the Winanjjikari Music Centre. Whilst students may not always experience major highlights like the DanceSite event referred to in the narrative above, in non-Festival times the students have been able to spend more time focussed on intercultural relationship building through collaborative jamming, songwriting and recording activities.

In order to encourage the students to be observant and self-reflexive during all of these rich experiences, we gave them field diaries to record the events of their days and their thoughts, feelings and interpretations of what was going on. We were also keen to allow them to report about the process in a way that was creative, personal, visual, and musical, and thus gave them video cameras to create a digital story of their experiences. When they returned to Brisbane we had a screening of their digital stories so they could share the lessons they learnt with university staff, their peers, family and friends. To monitor how the students were responding to the experience, we also interviewed them individually during the trip. We also interviewed staff from Winanjjikari, as well as other Indigenous community members the students had worked with, to find out what impact the project had on the community.

In this paper, we draw on insights from this material from the past four years, as well as ideas from service learning, cross-cultural collaborations and Indigenous studies, in addition to our own co-constructed narratives, to weave a story about what was learnt during these trips to Tennant Creek. While each of the narratives that emerged in this material uniquely reflected the creative voice of each storyteller and their own personal reactions to experiences and events, there were a number of common themes that have emerged during our analysis of the material. These themes seem to echo those found in the literature on service learning and cross-cultural collaborations with Indigenous artists. Some of these themes are touched on briefly in this article, and centre on the ways in which such programs can facilitate significant intercultural exchanges between students and Indigenous communities, assist communities with activities such as cultural maintenance, and provide students with creative and cultural experiences that have the potential to transform their understandings of Indigenous culture.



**Figure 1. Conservatorium students and Winanjjikari Music Centre Musicians (2009)**

### **A BRIEF BACKGROUND TO THE PROJECT**

This project builds on a growing national awareness of the need for better intercultural relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, and the role that higher

education and communities can play in improving this situation. In his 2008 national apology to the Stolen Generations, PM Kevin Rudd spoke about the need to build “a bridge between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians—a bridge based on a real respect rather than a thinly veiled contempt” (Rudd, 2008, p.3). “Our challenge for the future,” suggested Rudd, “is to now cross that bridge and, in so doing, to embrace a new partnership between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians” (Rudd, 2008, p.3). Likewise, Australian higher education institutions are beginning to recognise the need to “systemically embed Indigenous perspectives in curriculum and acknowledge the scholarly contributions of Indigenous communities in developing a culturally ethical framework to underpin research and learning” (NIHEN, 2009). This is reflected in various institutional policy documents, such as those of Griffith University which state that the University is “committed to the creation of a curriculum that is informed by and respects the knowledge systems of our first peoples—Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders” (Griffith University, 2011). Griffith’s commitment to the “inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander curricula follows an increasing national awareness of the need to incorporate such content into relevant areas of study and the complex and innovative ways in which Universities are approaching this task” (Griffith University, 2006, p.2).

Despite the endorsement of policies related to the inclusion of Indigenous knowledges and content across Australian universities, within many disciplines such as music, the incorporation of these Indigenous perspectives is still minimal. While some educators have brought Indigenous artists into performing arts classrooms (see, for example, Bartleet, 2010, 2011; Mackinlay, 2005), in many cases the inclusion of Indigenous curriculum content is presented in a somewhat tokenistic and abstract manner, removed from the lived experience of Indigenous culture (Newsome, 1999). Such an approach is highly problematic in music education for a number of complex reasons. As Mackinlay & Dunbar-Hall (2003, pp. 38-39) explain: “The teaching of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander musics in sectors of Australian music education is not the simple task of inclusion that government directives, syllabus expectations and ideological agendas can imply [...]. To teach Indigenous musics is also to teach the historical, social and political contexts in which they exist, to raise debates over the efficacy of the pedagogic act, and to uncover the dialectic and musical tensions that surround it.” These significant cultural, political, and pedagogical tensions are a common concern for those responsible for delivering music curricula to the large number of undergraduate students in Australia (Dunbar-Hall, 2002). This situation presents a pressing need for new strategies and approaches to the inclusion of Indigenous content in tertiary curricula, in particular focussing on strategies that are built on respectful and culturally appropriate interactions with Indigenous communities.

The service learning approach utilised in this project specifically addresses this need for innovative and more effective pedagogical approaches to the inclusion of Indigenous content in higher education. Service learning can be defined as a teaching and learning strategy that integrates community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach intercultural awareness, and strengthen communities.

Service learning steps outside of the traditional classroom to enable students to engage with real versus imagined subjects and, thus, learn about Indigenous culture through their own lived experience. Thus, such an approach not only supports Indigenous communities through projects of cultural significance to them, but also deepens the students' level of intercultural understanding.

In particular, our project has entailed students and staff travelling to Tennant Creek in two-week blocks to work alongside Indigenous artists and Elders on a range of community-led programs, such as recording and writing albums, documenting cultural activities, managing community festivals, staging and recording performances, building community arts infrastructure, and running school holiday programs. As we describe in the opening section to this article, the project activities always differ from year to year, in response to community needs. Since 2009 the project has directly involved over 30 students across seven undergraduate programs (in popular music, music technology, applied theatre, film and education) via the university's Work Integrated Learning program. We have also developed a partnership with The University of Queensland and hosted students from the School of Music and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Unit. These students are recruited via their Head of Department at each university. Within Tennant Creek itself, the project has involved work with over 30 Indigenous artists and Elders and over 50 youth across a range of activities. While our project demonstrates a systematic approach to both coordination and implementation, it is also designed to be flexible and responsive to community needs. The project is offered in second semester each year, to accommodate the varied timing of different community events, requirements, and seasons, and to allow sufficient time for student recruitment, gaining community permissions and ensuring cultural protocols are in place. In order to maintain a continuity of relationships with our Indigenous colleagues, each year the project has been facilitated by both of us. As we are married, this close relationship carries with it skin names and relationships with community members, and this has had a positive effect on the connections they have begun to develop with Indigenous Elders and artists in Tennant Creek.

Such an approach builds on a considerable body of international literature demonstrating that service learning is particularly effective in: promoting community awareness among students (Easterling & Rudell, 1997; Forte, 1997); deepening students' "moral and civic values" (Chupp & Joseph, 2010, p.192); facilitating social problem-solving by meeting community needs (Boyer, 1994); expanding students' disciplinary knowledge (Swords & Kiely, 2010); enabling exposure to real-world contexts, leading to "better retention and application of course content" (Chupp & Joseph, 2010, p.192); and assisting students to develop intercultural competence and the ability to interact with various cultural groups (Flannery & Ward, 1999).

In the following reflection, student participant Cody demonstrates how a service learning approach offers these identifiable benefits as mentioned above, and in particular how such apparently discrete benefits are integrated holistically in students' lives:

I have grown so very much as a person. I could go as far as saying that I learnt just as much in 12 days in Tennant Creek as I have in 3 years of university. [...] Tennant Creek is not just a place, it's a life changing experience, and everybody who has been there will say the same thing. [...] I went there thinking that the community would really learn from someone different coming into their community, but I left learning a lot more from them instead! [...] Truly a once in a lifetime experience and something that I will carry with me for the rest of my life (Cody, reflective journal entry, 2010).

As this statement illustrates, Cody's experiences in Tennant Creek encouraged her to reflect critically on her own assumptions, specifically regarding the level of understanding that she had gained through formal tertiary education. Her revelation that she learned more from the community than the community learned from her illustrates a highly critical repositioning of her concept of community and Indigenous communities in particular; something that would be difficult to achieve without the lived experiences *in* community that are central to service learning.



**Figure 2. Queensland Conservatorium students at the Desert Harmony Festival (2010).**

## **DEVELOPING STUDENTS' UNDERSTANDINGS OF INDIGENOUS CULTURE AND COMMUNITIES**

Later that night we are sitting on the doorstep of our cabin at the local caravan park. We notice that our feet are still covered in red dust, and we take a moment to enjoy the sensation of dirty feet. Lazing around the cabin with our students, we start chatting about what we experienced tonight. "This was a performance for Indigenous people, by Indigenous people," says Cody. She takes a sip of her beer before continuing. "And that's where the pride and the respect for their culture really came in, you know?" Thinking back to the look in J. D.'s eyes, we agree. "I thought it was amazing," chimes in Michael. "How different tribes of different languages could communicate through song and dance. There was no sense of competition, or discrimination. They embraced, respected, and supported each other." We look at each other and smile, understanding how their perceptive comments are underpinned by a rich and embodied learning experience. As we grapple with the complexities of our own relationships to this community,



we can take some comfort from the fact that these young musicians' lives have been transformed because of this event. Before they came on this trip they had never worked with an Indigenous musician or engaged with Indigenous music. After this performance and the two weeks of collaborations that preceded it, they have a new sense of understanding and appreciation for this culture. Gavin continues talking and drinking with the students, dissecting the many aspects of the experience, while Brydie tunes out from the discussions and looks out into the night. The silhouettes of small eucalyptus trees rustle in the breeze while images of painted up bodies and clouds of red dust flash through our minds. The sounds of clapping sticks ring in everyone's ears. Good performances are like this; they resonate through your mind and body long after the event. Knowing the power that these events have on us personally, we suspect this experience will filter in and out of our students' musical lives for a long time to come.

Through the project, our students quickly realised they were no longer in a task-oriented university classroom where assessment targets needed to be accomplished at the expense of all else. At first, some students grappled with this change of rhythm, finding it hard to reconcile the highly structured and goal-oriented nature of their prior university learning experiences with the ways of communicating and developing relationships within their new environment. As Adam reflects:

I had in the back of my head the fact that the week was quickly passing by and we hadn't made any moves to start recording. [...] I insisted *some* kind of plan should be made if we wanted to achieve something. [...] I knew we only had one morning to get through a lot of songs, so we worked quickly, grabbing good first or second takes and moving on (Adam, fieldwork diary, 2011).

The initial disjunct between the pace and rhythm of life and work forced students to prioritise relationship building over plans and schedules. As the project progressed with each visit, we noticed a change in the students' rhythm. We could see them come to realise the importance of showing respect, developing trust, sharing the load, and taking the time to build connections properly. One of the students, James reveals this understanding in his fieldwork diary:

At times it has felt like things have been moving quite slowly and we might not be achieving as much as was expected of us. However upon reflecting on our first week I have realised some of this slow-going has actually been a necessary and ideal way to settle in to the new environment, acclimatise and become familiar with who we are working with. We have begun to make a whole new series of contacts around town and actually built a very solid foundation from which to work off for the second week. I don't think it would have been advisable for us as guests in a new environment to begin in any other way. [...] Taking the time to acclimatise and allow the people of Tennant Creek a chance to get to know us and feel comfortable with us in their town has been a very necessary aspect of this trip (James, fieldwork diary, 2009).

Michael also describes this experience of building a relationship with community and individuals:

The first couple of days I was here it seemed like, you know, everybody was a little bit standoffish. ... But once we were here for a couple of days and stuff I

would find, even just riding a bike around, people would start to say ‘hi’ to me, and I’d start to see people that you know I’d recognise. And so they definitely warm up to you quick. Angus, I’ve talked to Angus probably the most out of all of them. We both share a love for Zakk Wylde and his guitar playing, and so we had common grounds there (Michael, interview, 2010).

In many cases, it was through music and performance that students were able to build relationships with members of the community, and in turn develop pathways for learning about Indigenous culture. A shared knowledge and interest in rock guitar playing was a simple but important basis through which Michael and Angus could establish a personal relationship, and from which knowledge could be shared.

The initial jarring of different agendas is something that researchers and musicians working in other cross-cultural collaborations have often spoken about (Barney & Solomon, 2009; Haig-Brown, 2001; Mackinlay 2008; Selby, 2004; Somerville & Perkins, 2003). There seem to be no set ways of aligning these agendas. As Katelyn Barney and Lexine Solomon (2009) explain, it is something that needs to be continually negotiated (p.213). Each year we noticed this negotiation happening in small but significant ways, often through the shared interest in music and musical performance. Students would get up to jam with the musicians, and these jam sessions provided the initial personal introductions that would be important over the course of the entire trip. In an interview with one of the Winanjikari musicians, Lester, he echoes this observation: “The guys came in and we just got up on the stage straight away and made music. We got together really quick. We all worked together and all the ideas came from each other, from all of us. We worked together as a team” (Lester Peterson, personal interview, July 2009). These interpersonal interactions were usually subtle and nuanced, involving little fanfare or explanation, but we could see that this relationship building and personal negotiation provided a powerful learning experience for students like Jeffrey:

It was an awesome experience getting to play and interact with them through music. It felt quite comfortable. [...] Something I have noticed though there is not a lot of oral communication, which worried me a bit before coming. [...] I really enjoy jamming with them and getting to know them musically. Sometimes, I felt while playing that there was no need for talking. We could all understand each other very clearly (Jeffrey, fieldwork diary, 2011).

As we watched the daily interactions at the Music Centre unfold with each trip, it became apparent that race was a spectre that could not be ignored. In the Centre, and indeed anywhere we travelled in town, our race was made visible to us. In her fieldwork diary, one of the students Rhiannon describes the foreign nature of this feeling: “It’s just strange to think I’m still in my home country, it doesn’t feel like it” (Rhiannon, fieldwork diary, June 2009). We could not hide aspects of our otherness and the difference of our faces, and even students like Mitch, Jeffrey and Sarah – who come from families with non-Anglo heritage – were forced to acknowledge their difference, and engage in personal reflection about aspects of race. As Indigenous student Sarah reflected:

After years of travelling in communities [...] they're all so different. You've got to learn a whole bunch of different cultural protocols and behaviours [...] and the stories are different, everything's different, so the best you can be is fluid and flexible. [...] Every country has its different character ... I was prepared for that, but it's the shock. [...] Firestick country is no place for a saltwater person (Sarah, interview, 2011).

In many respects, the students had become the Other. This resonates with the words of Giroux when he speaks about the social, political and cultural insights that come not from undertaking the “patronizing notion of understanding the Other,” but rather understanding “how the self is implicated in the construction of Otherness” (Giroux, 1992, p.32). This acknowledgement of our racial subjectivities and how we are implicated in this construction of Otherness also meant that we could not possibly shy away from the complexities and devastation that colonisation has caused our Indigenous peoples. This was not lost on some of the students. As non-Indigenous student Lecia writes in her fieldwork diary at the beginning of the trip, Indigenous people “... were surviving fine and well before the whites came and either slaughtered them or led them in the so called, ‘right direction.’ It is our history that makes me wonder whether these people will even want us here or our help now” (Lecia, fieldwork diary, June 2009). In this setting, the acknowledgment of nuanced concepts and embodied experiences of race played a significant role in students’ understanding of themselves and their Indigenous collaborators, as well as their ways of learning.

The students’ cross-cultural experiences involved these deep feelings of otherness on the one hand, but also areas of connection, usually facilitated through collaborative music making. As native French speaker and international student Jeffrey reflected on his collaborative experiences:

It was like home. Like I was working with some friends back in Tahiti ... I tried to read their faces, ‘cause that’s what we do in Tahiti anyway. Or even when we were playing – like oh, we’re changing, we’re going into the chorus - it’s just with ... an eyebrow [indicates with eyebrows]. ... These guys are really good person [sic], and I think I’ll always remember their faces when they get something done and they’re happy with it (Jeffrey, interview, 2011).

The community service learning approach in this project aims to connect such reflections and experiences with critical theories of difference and diversity (for example, see Carrington & Saggars, 2008; DePalma, 2008). These approaches build on socio-cultural understandings of “whiteness” and other critical constructions of race to explore “alternative possibilities to the forces of colonisation” by recognising and reconceptualising categories which maintain borders (for example, Indigenous/non-Indigenous) (Giroux, 1992), and questioning what is culturally appropriate in particular contexts at particular times (Moreton-Robinson, 2004; Nakata & Nakata, 2002; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999). Service learning is a pedagogical approach which steps outside the traditional classroom to enable such messy and complex intercultural experiences to occur. As in the case of this project, the learning and teaching activities often occurred in “space[s] no longer controlled by ... conventions of Western

academic discourse” (Mackinlay, 2008, p.258), enabling students to critically question the positioning of knowledge and learning practices within the University, academic discourse, and society more broadly. As student Josh said about his experiences with local Elder J. D.:

Back at home, I wouldn't necessarily go and work with somebody's grandfather or grandmother just to learn what they know. But here that's the way you learn, you go to the people who know best ... I was very lucky to write and be able to have some insight into their world of music. ... Songwriting with J. D. was very interesting, 'cause you had to do something that he didn't like for him to tell you. You just worked and worked and worked, and as soon as you took the wrong turn he was like 'nuh, let's go back this way' ... Actually, letting something go wrong is the best way to learn the right way I think, and ... I learnt that ... more this week than I have working with other people (Josh, interview, 2011).

As Josh's comment alludes, the most powerful and important part of this learning process comes from the intersection between relationship building and shared music making. In the creative experimentation and song writing process that J. D. and Josh embarked on, a space was created for these relationships to deepen and for the exchange of cultural knowledge. In this space, Josh noticed a marked contrast to the models of knowledge exchange and learning that he has become accustomed to through tertiary music education and Western learning contexts in general. This learning process echoes the understanding articulated by Mackinlay (2008):

One of the most powerfully transformative teaching and learning resources about Indigenous Australian performance practice that we all have at our fingertips is not something we will find in a book on the library shelf, in an article published by a 'white expert' (such as myself), or on an internet website. Rather, it rests in the multi-faceted potential of 'relationship' as a teaching and learning approach to Indigenous Australian musics (p. 4).



**Figure 3. Gavin Carfoot, QCGU students (Sophie and Jeff) with renowned musician Warren H Williams (2012)**

## COMMUNICATING THE EXPERIENCE

The early morning sun dances between the trees on the horizon as we travel the road south to Alice Springs. Gavin looks up from the speedo to the long road ahead, while Brydie rests the video camera on the edge of the car window, trying to capture this magical moment. A dramatic landscape of desert plains unfolds before us. It is mesmerising. After pressing stop on the camera, Brydie turns towards Gavin and says, "I think I've just got our closing credits footage." He smiles, keeping his eyes on the road. As we look back over the scene, we talk about how we are going to craft and contextualise the story of this experience. We have decided to use the medium of a digital story. This approach seems like it will give us the freedom to tell our story in a way that is evocative of the creative and embodied experience from which it came. We've asked the students to do the same.

A week after our long journey to Alice Springs and flight back home, we begin working on our digital story. As we sit in our Brisbane studio staring at our two Mac screens, the sounds and images of our trip come flooding back. Everything seems to take on a new dimension when viewed on a monitor, so far from the desert country where it was captured. After watching and listening to everything we have, Gavin suggests, "why don't we create a bit of a narrative structure?" Brydie thinks about it for a moment. "You mean with scenes and key themes?" she asks. "Yeah," he replies, "so we've got something to plug the images and music tracks into." Brydie agrees, reaching for a notepad to scribble down our ideas. After crafting a structure that has a logical flow with crescendos and cadence points, we go over our footage again, trying to find moments that evoke the magic of it all. It's at this point that the limitations of what we have dawn on us. "So many of the interactions aren't captured in this footage, are they?" Brydie observes. "Well," Gavin replies, "it just wasn't culturally appropriate to stick a camera in people's faces then." Reflecting on the cultural politics of our work, this seems like an important point. We realise that we can never capture or recreate those moments, and as musicians we're very sensitive to this limitation because of the temporal nature of our work. However, we do strive to create something new that explains the meaning and significance of these experiences for us. After we have a skeleton story in place, we then choose the music for our opening credits, "Rain Dancer" by J. D. and The Tableland Drifters. J. D.'s husky voice plays back again and again as we painstakingly edit footage to accompany it. Whether by some miraculous coincidence or something else, it begins to rain outside. Brisbane hasn't seen rain in months. The smell reminds us of the desert rains we experienced just a week ago. "Do you think J. D.'s song had anything to do with it?" Brydie asks, half smiling. Gavin's expression shows he was thinking the same thing.

A couple of months later, we decide to showcase these stories in a performance of a different kind. Only a small number of students are fortunate enough to join us on this trip, so we're mindful that we need to share these stories with the broader community back home. As we wait in the Boardroom of the Conservatorium for a different crowd to gather, we are struck by the way in which that breath-taking performance we experienced in the desert has inspired this. The Boardroom lights are dimmed, revealing a large screen playing video footage from our desert tales. Taking turns, we introduce our stories and play them one after the other. The students' stories present recurrent themes of cross-cultural understandings, transformative learning, and reflections about the borrowed bicycles that the

students had become attached to in Tennant Creek. Despite the recurring themes, each story uniquely reflects the personal and creative voice of its teller. The room is abuzz with excitement at the end of our screening; it seems as though the stories have evoked some of that desert magic tonight. However, that evocation leaves us feeling uneasy again. As we turn off the Boardroom lights, close the door and walk away at the end of the showcase, we are left wondering about the best ways to acknowledge the relationships and dynamics of our creative contexts and processes.

During each annual showcase of these digital stories, we observed how these narratives touched viewers and moved them to think about Indigenous culture in new ways. The stories also played an important role in encouraging a continued commitment and investment in the project from the Indigenous artists involved. With the permission of our collaborators, we have also made these stories available on YouTube (see [www.youtube.com/user/desertmusicstories](http://www.youtube.com/user/desertmusicstories)), and these have become a useful advocacy tool for their work. Whilst there have not been any specific conflicts that have arisen in the dissemination of these stories, some critical tensions are inherent in this act of representing Indigenous culture through personal narratives, and this still remains an important critique of the use of digital stories as a communication medium. We are very mindful that the images and sounds we have used are deeply symbolic and significant to our Indigenous collaborators, and we're mindful we need to tread carefully with how we use them. We have shared our digital stories with them, and they are very happy for us to present the videos publically. However, we are still left to question the politics and tensions that arise in this performative act of sharing. They are our stories told from the lens of our personal experiences, but they are intertwined with important relationships with others. In a creative medium like music, these issues can sometimes get lost or glossed over. We can recall countless times that composers of Western Art Music have spoken about their appropriation of non-Western music and culture, and we feel uncomfortable with the cultural politics inherent in many of those practices.

We are keenly aware of the need to maintain strong relationships with our Indigenous collaborators not only during the project, but also as we share these stories with the broader community, to ensure that we adhere to appropriate cultural protocols and keep community interests at the forefront of our work. We all too aware that the communication of these stories can sometimes inadvertently become "colonised" by Western ways of learning and teaching and conducting research. As such we are cognisant of the need to maintain close relationships with our Indigenous collaborators in each community, following their lead on the ways in which we negotiate the service learning project's design and communication methods.

## CONCLUSION

As we have suggested in this article, community service learning is a useful means of enabling students to engage with *real* versus *imagined* subjects (Tamisari, 2006, p. 276), and to experience ideology in their own lived experience. In recent years, the service learning approach has also been recognised not just for its benefits for

learning and teaching within the university context, but also for its ability to contribute towards significant social change agendas (for example, Clayton, Bringle, Senor, Huq, & Morrison, 2010; Carrington & Siggers, 2008). This is echoed in one of the students, Mitch's reflections:

In learning about other people's culture and musical styles, I felt I learnt more about my own [...]. I saw great value in the cultural exchange that took place, and realised that as an urban Australian, I really knew nothing about indigenous culture. I am grateful that I was given the opportunity to take part in such an amazing experience. [...] Culturally, I will be able to take a lot of knowledge back home about the indigenous community, that I otherwise wouldn't have learnt had it not been for this trip (Mitch, reflective journal entry, 2010).

Such a comment shows how this pedagogical framework can encourage "more equitable and mutually beneficial relationships between students and community members" (Chupp & Joseph, 2010). Moreover, it demonstrates that when "universities give very high priority to actively solving strategic, real world, problems" such as intercultural relationship building with communities, "a much greater likelihood exists that they will significantly advance citizenship, social justice and the public good" (Burkhardt & Hudson, 2008, p.91). Having said this, in our project we have been mindful to not only focus on the benefits of this work for students, but also for the Tennant Creek community. As Indigenous artist Lynette explains:

Everything that I hope the students have learnt and the people have learnt is that it's a two-way process. I think that the musicians here have engaged with the Conservatorium students in a way that they've never engaged with other people before, other musicians, because the Conservatorium students are so open to new ideas and very good at what they do. To us they're the *crème de la crème* of where they've come from. And they've come to work with us. So I think we've both learnt a lot from each other. You know, I don't want them to go. (Personal interview, 2009)

These community benefits are also mentioned by Alan Murn, Executive Officer of Barkly Regional Arts in Tennant Creek:

It's always an illuminating exercise for us out here to view Barkly Arts and Winanjjikari Music Centre activities, programs, initiatives and conditions through fresh eyes and from the moment I gathered you all up at AS airport and banded up the road 500 km to our country, to the last morning when you were poured exhausted onto the Greyhound at 3am I used your immersion into our zone as a touchstone, a gauge, another window to view ourselves. What I did see immediately is that we were throwing everything at you from day one and demanding of you high levels of resilience, innovation, tolerance, acclimatization, cross-cultural understanding and stamina. Your immersion here has had many dimensions, as does our work here, as does each day, and as each day played out with a new major drama you infused it into your experience and gave back to us an energy and understanding of immeasurable importance (Reflections on the project, 2010).

Such comments point towards the potential for community service learning programs to foster meaningful collaborations between universities and Indigenous communities.

For both Lynette and Alan, working with students on this service learning project has been premised on a sense of mutual learning and collaboration, an exchange of creative ideas, openness and intercultural understanding. As we have attempted to show in this article, the way that these partnerships have been developed can assist communities with activities such as cultural maintenance, and provide students with life changing personal experiences that significantly deepen their understandings of Indigenous culture.

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